



Songs of a forgotten genius

PRADEEP CHAKRAVARTHY

October 30, 2010

Shahaji I's compositions, though musically complex and highly evocative, are rarely sung today. Were his music more popular, he would be recognised as one of the greatest composers ever...

Thanjavur Sarasvati Mahal Library. Classy composer: Portrait of Shahaji I.

One of India's few traditions that is still going strong is Carnatic music. It cannot be disputed that Carnatic music as we know it today, owes it to Thanjavur for its birth and Chennai for its current day sustenance. Since the 16th century, Thanjavur was the place where the rules of this music were created. It is therefore only to be expected that the finest music was also created in one of India's grandest and most erudite courts. A worthy successor to the Nayak patronage of music was the second Maratha king of Thanjavur, Shahaji I (1684 - 1712). As a standing example of tolerance, the Maratha kings in general and Shahaji in particular, seamlessly blended their culture into the existing Telugu, Sanskrit and Tamil culture of Thanjavur.

Waning popularity

Shahaji's compositions don't figure in music concerts, a lesson worth learning for all who seek to create a culture. Great music, created by him and his royal successors, died with the short-sighted abolishment of the Devadasi community in the early 20th century. They never thought of popularising their music to a larger group nor did their descendants fund

musicians to learn it. Among a constellation of royal composers, Shahaji I stands unsurpassed. His magnificent operas and padams that focus on the heroine seeking merger with the lord are soaked in metaphor and elegance, and must have had very creative deployment of the ragas. Sadly, all of this is relegated to dusty corners of the Thanjavur library in palm leaves that are rarely touched today. We have one tantalising glimpse of the music in an opera the king wrote, to be danced in his favourite temple for Siva as Tyagaraja in Tiruvarur. For this we need to thank that redoubtable musicologist Prof. P Sambamoorthy.

In his preface to the book, “Pallaki Seva Prabhandamu,” he recounts the difficulty in obtaining the notation for the opera. The old devadasi Veerammal knew the songs but refused to sing it, though it had been many years since the enactment of the play had stopped. He did persuade a local zamindar to ask her and she could not refuse. She sang all the songs she recollected as the musicologists frantically notated it as they heard it. One can only imagine the quaint scene in which an old lady who had once worn the grandest jewellery in the town, was seated simply in a beautiful mansion and singing as she provided the abhinaya for songs that were forgotten for many years and composed more than two centuries back!

Prof.Sambamoorthy, since then, was able to get the text of a similar drama on Vishnu though no notations were available. The Siva Pallaki Seva Prabhandam has the songs in their Telugu script as well as in Tamil with meanings and notations. Let us look at some glimpses of this masterpiece of one of Carnatic music's earlier composers.

The plot is a simple one. Set in Tiruvarur, the goddess, Parvati as Kamalamba, pines for her beloved, Tyagaraja. She sends her companion ladies who shy away as they see Tyagaraja seated in court in all his splendour. This is referred to as “seated in Golu” an indication of a Navarathri custom of display we still follow, that was born in Thanjavur. The first part of the opera has humour as the ladies debate on who can give the message to Tyagaraja. The moon, snake, deer are all considered and deemed unworthy. They dismiss the moon as having no character; the snake is a split-tongued creature and the deer a beast that is not qualified to carry a message of love. They go themselves, and deliver the message. Tyagaraja accedes, climbs into his palanquin, comes to take the goddess with him and both of them, after a meal and much merriment in the form of music and dance retire to the bedchamber for the night.

The later part of the opera has descriptive songs about the palanquin and the divine meal. Both of these give us a glimpse of the textiles and the food that were enjoyed in Thanjavur in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Descriptive

Tuned to the raga Sankarabaranam, the song describes the palanquin elegantly carved and inset with many gems. Tassels in green and red silk woven with gems are mentioned. The finials have emeralds and rubies. Mention is made of two embroidered bolsters. The mattress within the palanquin is embroidered in gold and referred to as the ‘sakalathi

methalu' in Telugu. The handles inset with blue sapphires protrude from the silk screens. The ornaments of the goddess are also dealt with in great detail, in keeping with the bejewelled palanquin. Such a palanquin requires careful handling and another song deals exclusively with how it ought to be carried within the precincts of the temple! This is probably the only play with stage directions incorporated into the text!

The waters of the Cauvery made Thanjavur the rice bowl of the south and our royal composer dedicates one song in the raga Nadanamakriya to the feast set before the divine couple. We still enjoy all the delicacies from the 17th century. “Appropriate drinks” (mentioned first!), *Pongal*, *Morekuzzhambu*, *Vadam*, *Pooris* fried in *ghee*, *dosa*, *iddlies*, pickle, pulses without their skin, fruits, sweets made of sugar, honey, different varieties of mixed rice, tamarind rice, *thirattipal* (*Khoa*), white coloured curd rice, curds with cream and buttermilk with crushed dry ginger are the components of the feast. All of this is washed down with pure water from the Ganga, and the ubiquitous Thanjavur after-meal staple, *thamboolam* or *paan* that is “fragrant with the smell of camphor”.

Though the book is available the songs languish in the AIR studio archives and in the memories of dance enthusiasts who have seen this danced many decades back. It is time that Shahaji takes his rightful position amongst the greatest composers. All his works except this have no notations, but surely, today's talented vocalists are more than adept at setting these forgotten verses to tune with the ragas mentioned?

Perhaps someday the corridors of the vast temple will reverberate once more with the melodies of a forgotten royal devotee and women who gave their life in the service of the divine through music and dance, two of the most sacred forms of worship.

Keywords: [Indian tradition music](#), [Maratha king](#), [Shahaji I](#)